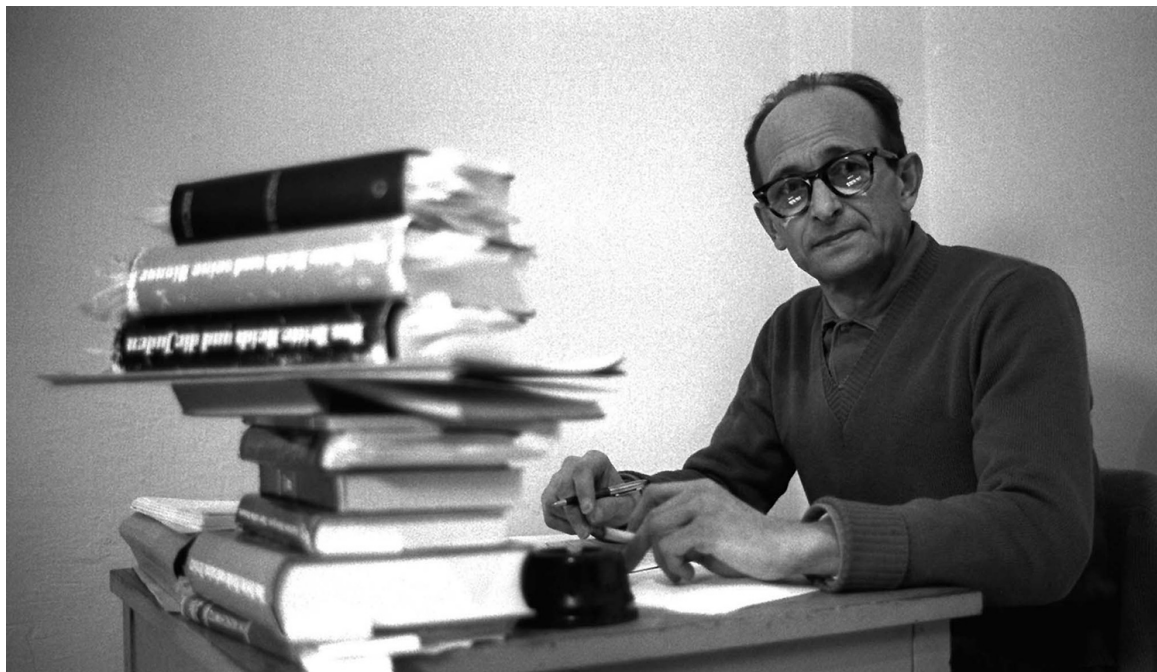


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The Misrepresentation of the Past in the Cinema

The dangers lurking in false portrayals of the Nazi official show why Holocaust films must be held to account.



Adolf Eichmann in Galami Prison near Haifa while waiting for his trial to open. *Gpo/Getty Images.*

LAST WORD
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I am grateful to Yaacov Lozowick, Walter Reich, and Jonathan Tobin for their responses to my essay in *Mosaic*, “[The Truth of the Capture of Adolf Eichmann](#).” Where I wrote primarily about contemporary American perceptions of Eichmann as mediated by Hollywood, and about the Israeli accounts of his captivity on which these perceptions have come to be based, each of my respondents has widened the lens to take in broader subjects.

Thus, Yaacov Lozowick, revisiting Hannah Arendt’s famously reductive portrait of Eichmann as epitomizing the bureaucratic “banality of evil,” now finds in my essay some reason to rethink his own past approach to that issue. Walter Reich, reminding us not to expect too much of Holocaust movies, underlines the enduring significance of the Eichmann trial itself. Jonathan Tobin argues that attempts to balance portrayals of Eichmann reflect “the discomfort Jews themselves have with the use of power,” especially when exercised by the state of Israel.

I don’t claim authority on any of these angles of the Eichmann story. But since my respondents have pushed the discussion in new directions, I’ll follow their lead. Below are my impressions—which are not to be confused with fully researched findings.

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I am fascinated by Yaacov Lozowick's *rethinking* of Arendt's banality-of-evil thesis. While that thesis, he writes, was "demonstrably false . . . Kramer's essay has led me to wonder if perhaps [it] is not quite as false as I used to think." Coming from Lozowick, the author of a thoroughly researched book on Eichmann's bureaucratic setting (*Hitler's Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil*, 2000), this is quite remarkable.

In fact, however, I had the same unsettling thoughts as I read account after account by Eichmann's captors. True, the half-naked Eichmann chained to a bed in 1960 was far from the SS-uniformed Eichmann bound to his desk in 1942. The Eichmann sitting in a glass booth in the courtroom was even farther removed from his former self. Making this point directly, the Hebrew University philosopher Gershom Scholem wrote in a cutting letter to Arendt:

I don't picture Eichmann, as he marched around in his SS uniform and relished how everyone shivered in fear before him, as the banal gentleman you want to persuade us he was, ironically or not. I refuse to go along. I've read enough descriptions and interviews of Nazi functionaries and their conduct in front of Jews—while the going was good—to mistrust this innocuous *ex-post-facto* concoction. The gentlemen enjoyed their evil, so long as there was something to enjoy. One behaves differently after the party's over, of course.

Still, no one's personality is entirely contingent on circumstances. To Eichmann's Israeli captors, the trait that most stood out was his obsequiousness. Rafi Eitan, a member of the team and a keen observer of personality, perhaps got to the core of it:

Eichmann was an officer, and his education had instilled a sense of loyalty in him. He had been taught to obey orders to the letter. He was conditioned to obey orders from his superiors. When *we* became the authority, he had to obey; he did what *we* wanted, without hesitation.

Eichmann himself later inflated this blind obedience (he called it *Kadavergehorsam*, the "obedience of corpses") into a kind of defense. But the German-born Israeli agent Zvi Aharoni, who practically walked in Eichmann's shoes during the months of the hunt, had similarly picked up on this aspect of his personality and reached a blunt conclusion: "I did not see Eichmann as someone very evil, but as a bland and obedient official in a satanic system." This wasn't even the banality of evil. It was just banality.

Nor was Rafi Eitan much impressed by Eichmann's intellect. "You'll find millions like him in the world," he concluded ruefully. Eichmann was "someone of mediocre-plus intelligence—no more than that." Thus, from the heights of Israeli intelligence, did Eichmann appear just as small as he would from the Arendtian heights of German-Jewish philosophy.

Unfortunately, Arendt packaged her observations about Eichmann in a condescending broadside against Israel (and its leader David Ben-Gurion), the wartime heads of East European Jewry (the *Judenräte*), and the chief prosecutor of the case (Gideon Hausner, dismissed by her as "a typical Galician Jew"). Even Arendt's Israeli defender, the writer Amos Elon, admitted that "at times her style was harsh and insolent, the tone professorial and imperious." As my late friend Walter Laqueur once put it: "Arendt was attacked not so much for what she said as for how she said it. Her attackers, on the

other hand, were all too often inclined to throw out the baby with the bathwater.”

Sometimes, tone is everything. Arendt’s smug lack of empathy undercut her, leading the famed sociologist Edward Shils to capture her thus: “No great *khakhemes* [wise woman], our Hannah.”

Indeed, Eichmann’s gray persona may be why, for the Mossad chief Isser Harel, capturing him wasn’t enough. Harel immediately proceeded to the project of tracking down Josef Mengele, the infamous “Angel of Death” who had conducted murderous experiments on prisoners in Auschwitz.

It’s not hard to understand why. While Eichmann had dropped out of vocational school, Mengele had earned two doctorates and positioned himself on the cutting edge of Nazi “race science.” Eichmann worked deep inside the bureaucracy, away from view: Mengele had been on the selection ramp and was witnessed by dozens of survivors who could testify at a war-crimes trial.

And so, even as the Eichmann trial took shape, Harel redoubled the Mossad’s efforts, spearheaded by none other than Aharoni, to find Mengele. The Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman has summarized that effort as entailing “countless hours of labor, huge sums of money, scores of agents and sources, wiretaps, break-ins, secret photographs, and just about every other ploy in the espionage toolkit, including recruiting Nazis and journalists.” In 2007, the Mossad’s history branch compiled its own retrospective account of the search; reaching almost 400 pages, it was [released](#) in 2017. The resources expended on the Mengele operation, it concluded, were “beyond calculation.”

Had Mengele been captured, his sensational trial in Israel would have reduced the Eichmann trial to a footnote. But of course it wasn’t to be: Mengele proved more elusive than Eichmann, he had more resources at his disposal, and other urgent priorities derailed the Mossad search. So the primary face of Nazi horror, from 1960 onward, remained a man invariably described (also by Lozowick) as “middle-aged, balding, and bespectacled,” and occupying a middling place on the SS organizational chart.

It was Teddy Kollek, Ben-Gurion’s bureau chief and the orchestrator of the trial’s logistics, who grasped the emotional and educational value of trying an individual perpetrator, almost any individual perpetrator:

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The story that had made the strongest impression up to that time was *The Diary of Anne Frank*, although there was comparatively little visible cruelty in it. But that story was personal. You could envision the individuals, you identified with them; they were you. And here, [too,] by seeing one criminal, by watching the surviving victims of his crimes facing him in the dock, the story had a better chance of reaching young Jews in Israel, Jews in the Diaspora, and the world as a whole.

Kollek, an adept showman, appreciated the dramatic potential of the trial, even if Eichmann wasn't the perfectly cast exemplar of the mass murderer. True, he had been full of anti-Semitic zeal: far from being unthinking, he knew precisely the purpose and ideological rationale of his mission. Arendt's claim that he "never realized what he was doing" doesn't withstand even minimal scrutiny of his own recorded words before his capture. (The German philosopher Bettina Stangneth closed that case in her exhaustive *Eichmann before Jerusalem*, 2011.) Nevertheless, writes Lozowick, "he was a common type in the Germany of Arendt's generation . . . a particular kind of early-20th-century German-speaking bureaucrat that is also familiar from the fiction of Franz Kafka."

Yes, he was that, too, and his persona, once generalized to the entire Nazi enterprise, created a permanent ambiguity that won't ever be dissipated. What Lozowick calls the "inflation" of Eichmann's role has thus come at a cost. For while within his assigned role he was ruthlessly resourceful, and even innovative, he was not the "architect of the Final Solution"—a moniker more appropriate to Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, or Heinrich ("Gestapo") Müller—all of them Eichmann's superiors in every way.

Yet not only does Eichmann now stand in one row with them; according to Google Trends, the release of the film *Operation Finale* in 2018 has caused interest in Eichmann to spike, leaving his superiors well behind. This is the power of Hollywood to distort. There *were* "brilliantly evil" people behind the Holocaust. But the phrase doesn't fit the man in the glass booth, and it's all the more misleading when one realizes that the Eichmann now imagined by a whole generation looks a lot like the man who portrays him in that film: the captivating Sir Ben Kingsley.

Still, that's far from the whole story. In "The Vital Task of Holocaust Memory," his own response to my essay, Walter Reich rightly [brings us back](#) to the value of the Eichmann trial: it encouraged the *survivors* to break their silence. Belatedly, the era of the witnesses commenced, and only now is it ending.

For that, we owe a huge debt to David Ben-Gurion. If what was involved in the hunt for Eichmann had been only a matter of vengeance, he could have ordered him killed. But, for Israel's founder, Eichmann was a necessary foil for the survivors. Some individual had to stand in the defendant's dock, but the trial revolved around the witness stand, which was the scene of every memorable moment.

Why did Ben-Gurion go to the trouble? It's often said that he did it to educate Israel's young people, for many of whom the Holocaust was already a remote event. Walter Reich calls this Ben-Gurion's "primary goal." But that idea seems to have come late to him, only after Eichmann's capture. Originally, his motive for the capture was at once deeper and more particular: the Holocaust, he believed, was a crime not only against the Jewish people but against the entire Zionist project *for* that people.

The logic? The Holocaust had deprived the yishuv, the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine, of the vast reservoir of Jews who would have filled the eventual Jewish state. Ben-Gurion explained this to Konrad Adenauer, the West German chancellor, at their historic meeting in March 1960, two months before Eichmann's capture:

Those of our people who had vision, knowledge, ability, idealism, readiness for self-sacrifice, and material means; that was European Jewry. . . . We are now cut off from this source of human material. If we had now in Israel four to five million Jews, no question of security would exist. . . . Hitler almost murdered the Jewish state, our hope and heritage for 3,000 years.

Similarly, Ben-Gurion firmly believed that Haj Amin al-Husseini, the exiled Mufti of Jerusalem, must have played an outsized role in the Holocaust during the years he spent as Hitler's guest in Berlin. After all, the Palestinian Arabs stood to be the prime beneficiaries of the destruction of the Jews. (This theme—the putative link between Eichmann and the pro-Nazi Mufti—would later become one of the sidebars of the trial; in the end, there wasn't enough evidence to substantiate the charge, but the prosecution spared no effort in pursuing it, building a huge archive of every Mufti-related wartime document.)

Since the Holocaust was a crime not only against the Jewish people but also specifically against Zion, Ben-Gurion had no doubt that the state of Israel had the right to judge the perpetrators of the Holocaust, even though the state came into being only after the events. The destruction of European Jewry didn't "almost murder" the citizens of any other alternative proposed venue for a trial. Nor did it "almost murder" American Jewry, some of whose leaders reprimanded Israel for itschutzpah in seizing Eichmann.

Instead, the losses of the Holocaust were overwhelmingly Israel's: the death of European Jewry had left the yishuv a poor and vulnerable orphan. Although its rich American uncle had come to its aid with money, at the time of Eichmann's capture in 1960 Israel's Jewish population stood at only two million—and half of that owed to the unexpected influx of Jewish refugees from Muslim lands who hadn't been ideological Zionists at all.

So Eichmann's trial had a purpose beyond education. It established Israel as the heir to the victims. Israel was still too small, as compared with American Jewry, to claim to try Eichmann on behalf of all Jewry. But it did claim to try him on behalf of the victims. This was the key message of prosecutor Hausner's immortal opening statement:

I am not standing alone. With me, at this moment, are six-million accusers. But they cannot rise to their feet and point an accusing finger towards him who sits in the glass booth and cry: "I accuse." For their ashes are piled up on the hills of Auschwitz and the fields of Treblinka, or have been swept away by the rivers of Poland. Their graves are scattered throughout the length and breadth of Europe. Their blood cries out, but their voice is not heard. Therefore I will be their spokesman and in their name I will unfold the awesome indictment.



Jonathan Tobin takes us to a dark place: the “humanized” Eichmann presented in *Operation Finale* and elsewhere, he argues, is the most grotesque example of the ceaseless efforts to present the “other side” of any conflict involving Israel.

By now, setting up a camera lens on the side of Palestinian terrorists is an old Hollywood trope. But extending the same empathy to a Nazi war criminal, maintains Tobin, is a new low. This inversion, he suggests, reflects the deep ambivalence of many, including many Jews, over Israel’s necessary exercise of sovereign power. And the capture of Eichmann was the coercive use of such power in its purest form.

No doubt, Tobin has identified a genuine subtext in *Operation Finale*, the Hollywood rendition of Eichmann directed by Chris Weitz and starring Ben Kingsley. Thus, while the real Eichmann scrambled to shed responsibility, Kingsley’s Eichmann takes a different tack, defiantly challenging Israel’s moral authority. One example is this purported dialogue between Eichmann and Peter Malkin, his Israeli captor-confidant:

Eichmann: Why am I the one guilty for my country’s mistakes?

Malkin: So you would say what you did to my people was a mistake?

Eichmann: We were told that Germany, our land of hope and possibility, was being overrun. If we were to survive. . . .

Malkin: Yes, but there’s a line.

Eichmann: And you believe you people have found that line, do you? Funny. I’ve heard the rumors, a facility in the Negev desert. You know, a hydrogen bomb rarely asks the age of its victims.

Malkin: That’s not the same thing and you know it.

Eichmann’s line of argument here is entirely the work of the screenwriter Matthew Orton. The dialogue doesn’t figure in Malkin’s own account of the capture, because it couldn’t have: in May 1960, even U.S. intelligence didn’t yet know about the nuclear reactor in Dimona. So it’s the screenwriter who uses the character of Eichmann to suggest that if Israel—the Jews’ “land of hope and possibility”—faced the prospect of being “overrun,” it, too, would

resort to indiscriminate mass destruction. Malkin's curt rejoinder hardly refutes the suggestion. One imagines young viewers wondering to themselves: hey, how are they *not* the same?

Surely, when it comes to ambivalence about Israel's exercise of power, the wholesale exercise of specifically nuclear power is in a class of its own; for that reason alone, the scene would confirm Tobin's suspicions. In fairness, though, *Operation Finale* never casts doubt on Israel's right to seize Eichmann. In another scene, before the team departs for Argentina, their evening's revelry is interrupted by the sudden appearance of David Ben-Gurion himself, who gives them an inspiring speech justifying their mission:

If you succeed, we deny the world the chance to let Eichmann's murderous edicts sink into obscurity. For the first time in our history, we will judge our executioner. We will also warn off any who may wish to follow his example. If you fail, he escapes justice, perhaps forever. For the sake of our people, I beg you, do not fail.

This speech, too, never happened, so the same screenwriter must have chosen to have Ben-Gurion make the moral case. Where does that leave us? The portrayal of the "affably evil" Eichmann in *Operation Finale*, I suspect, wasn't born of any doubt about the demands of justice. It was a dramatic artifice to save the plot. Up for debate is whether that makes the whole enterprise less odious or only more so.

The historian Bernard Lewis, my late mentor, once described "the misrepresentation of the past in the cinema" as "the most fertile and effective source" of misinformation about history, "certainly since the disappearance of the Soviet educational system, and I am not at all sure that it couldn't compare favorably even with that, in terms of skill and effectiveness in historical distortion and perversion."

The difference, of course, is that unlike in a Soviet classroom, no one is compelled to sit in a movie theater. But that's exactly the source of the "perversion": cinema is an industry, based on the proven assumption that most people who buy tickets want to be entertained first, enlightened later.

For films on the Holocaust, this poses a daunting dilemma. Walter Reich is absolutely right: Holocaust films that are true to reality are excruciating to watch. It's hard to take in *The Grey Zone* or *Son of Saul* in one sitting, and almost impossible to see them twice. Such films can't possibly compete with the usual Hollywood fare at the box office, so it's a miracle they get made at all.

But that is no reason to dismiss the usual fare with a shrug. Yes, some number of American Jewish elites will always defer to Hollywood-class celebrities whenever the latter show some willingness to put bits of the Holocaust story before a distracted America. I wouldn't want to second-guess these established arbiters of what's "good for the Jews" in America. But I do know what's good for Jewish (or any) history, and that is historical accuracy.

The pursuit of such accuracy is the mission of Holocaust museums and Holocaust scholarship, one of whose declared roles has been to keep the outright *denial* of the Holocaust at bay. Another should be to hold Holocaust cinema to account.